RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Body Politics and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Indian Writing in English, With Reference to Selected Works by Anita Nair, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu and Meena Kandasamy

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Submitted by:

Gunja Patni

Enrl. No.: ICG/2017/ 24554

Under the Supervision of:

Dr. Rimika Singhvi

Asso. Prof. & Head

Department of English

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I. Topic/ Tentative Title

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II. Introduction

- **Background:** Man and Woman both are the loving children of God and are complementary to each other. Neither of them is superior to the other. But, since India has had a patriarchal form of society, gaps arise between the two sexes, especially in terms of the power and freedom enjoyed (or not) by both. Sudhir Kakar in "Feminine Identity in India" (1988) discusses the prevalent idea that for Indian women, it is not wifehood alone which confers a social status on women; what is required is a faithful adherence to the code of behaviour prescribed for her in the law texts. In the words of Manu too: "Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife."

  Since long, women have had to deal with multi-layered traditions, a patriarchal society and indigenous customs that alienate her from her body. But the appropriation of written narratives, over the years, has marked their entry into the sphere of public discourse thereby challenging the male canon. The concept of the ideal Indian woman is rather outdated now. With the turn of the century, the post-modern Indian women writers have dared to shatter the myth of the male-dominated social system and have re-incarnated themselves in the image of the 'new' woman who claims her subjectivity, individuality and sexuality, by disallowing her body to be governed by others. Some such prominent Indian women writers as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu and Meena Kandasamy, and the like, have broken the shackles of tradition and have portrayed the 'New Woman' in their writings. Now no more do we find women as merely meek, submissive and/or domestic. Due to the impact of

education, women too have realized what miracles education can bring into their life. The reason is that she has come to realize that it is her economic dependence which leads the man to dominate over her and also subject her to unbearable mental and physical torture. A modern woman knows that her life is her own and nobody has the right to regulate it - be it her family, society, religion and/or country – treating her only as somebody's daughter, wife and/or mother. The modern woman thus wishes to liberate herself from traditional sources of authority and relationships of dependence, so that she may assume the position of an autonomous, self-constituting subject. All of this is particularly true of the works of two of the three selected authors selected for this study, viz. Anita Nair (1966-) and Meena Kandasamy (1984-). The third one is Sreemoyee Piu Kundu (1978-) who attempts to make an honest effort towards bringing to light the pressure placed on a woman to curb her sexual desires. Kundu is credited with dealing with topics we often choose to treat as best-kept secrets.

Anita Nair was born in Kerala and is one of the finest and most powerful writers in English today with an international repute to boot. A best-selling author of fiction and poetry, Nair's books are translated into many languages. Some of her notable works include *Satyr of the Subway, The Better Man, Ladies Coupe, Mistress, Idris: Keeper of the Light, Cut Like Wound*; a poetry-collection entitled *Malabar Mind*; has dabbled in children's literature with *The Puffin Book of Myths and Legends,* among others. Her highly acclaimed novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001) - which has chosen as one of the primary texts for this study - is the story of a woman's search for her strength, independence and identity. The word 'Coupe' is used to suggest a confession box wherein the six women characters, namely Akhilandeshwari, Sheela, Margaret Shanti, Marikolanthu, Janaki and Prabha Devi, confess intimate details about their life o each other thereby lending a confessional tone to the novel. Nair's debut collection of poems, entitled *Malabar Mind* (2011), too has beenchosen for the purposes of this study. The poems are deeply-rooted in the South Indian landscapeand deal with the real and the corporeal; landscapes and mindscapes.

Sreemoyee Piu Kundu, a postgraduate in History from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, is an acclaimed journalist and novelist based in Delhi. She is the author of *Faraway Music* (2013), *Sita's Curse* (2014) and *You've Got the Wrong Girl!* (2016) and is currently working on a political tragedy entitled *Rahula*. She is also a columnist on sexuality and gender. Kundu's best-selling work on female erotica entitled *Sita's Curse* (primary source) is about a woman who feels trapped in a love-less marriage and is attracted by a family guru, among other things. The story is based on corporeal desire and the fine balance that erotica has to tread in India between love and lust.

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist based in Chennai. Most of her works are centered on feminism and casteism. Her two poetry-collections are *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Millitancy* (2010). Her novels include *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017). Crusading for equality and justice, she is one of the boldest voices of the angry, young Indian woman today. Her semi- autobiographical novel chosen for the present study -*When I Hit You…* - tells the story of a newly-wed writer experiencing rapid social isolation and extreme violence at her husband's hands. In fact, the novel echoes the narratives of thousands of other women who face violence (marital rape, abuse, etc.) in the bedroom. The novel is a powerful feminist treatise on self-actualization and escape. Kandasamy's poetry-anthology entitled *Ms. Militancy* (2010), also a primary source, is a collection of unapologetic verses targeting the patriarchy and a caste-based Brahmanical Hindu society.

- **Research Problem:** Literature is an incredibly versatile instrument for it bears the mark of the lived, living and yet to be lived experiences. Feminist literature encompasses all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category. But, when one thinks of this area of scholarship, the names that come to the mind readily are those of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Judith Butler, etc. since the growth of feminism is usually attributed to the West. It is true that 'Women's Studies' as a discipline began in the US in the late 1960's and was established in other First World nations in the 1970s,

but the postcolonial feminist suggests that women are not homogenous and so their experiences too are different. One cannot interpret history in monolithic universal terms, ignoring the differences in culture, since feminism is multicultural and we are all living in a world of 'feminisms'! The experiences of a woman living in India are different from the one living in Kenya. Even the problems that an Indian woman faces are quite different from the rest of the world. Since India has a patriarchal form of society wherein women are stereotyped as weak, submissive and dependent, and wifehood has been the primary source of female identity, therefore fidelity and chastity have been the models to restrict the sexuality of women. In the words of Radha Chakravarty:

> Patriarchy in India has worked through a system of benevolent paternalism wherein women were rewarded for conformity, making subordination invisible. Besides, women, through mythology, were made to accept that the real power lies in women's ability to sacrifice and denying themselves the access to power.

Indian writing in English today has come to occupy a respectable position and the credit for it goes to a good number of women writers whose writings have brought to light various aspects of their lived experience that were left untouched and ignored by their male counterparts. Widely considered as feminist writers, most of such women writers have laid bare the heart and soul of their women characters, who feel a longing to claim their own space and to realize their worth as individuals. The 21st century, however, has been about women who are trying hard to assert her identity, giving literary writers and critics the potential for re-theorizing subjectivity as voice, agency and empowerment. These are precisely the areas which will be problematized in the thesis with respect to the chosen literary works (novels and poems) so as to unravel the 'feminine mystique' and go beyond it to examine the 'woman question'.

- **Working Definition of Terms:**

--- Agency: the ability for a person or agent to act for herself or himself

--- Body Politics: control of female body and her sexuality in the name of cultural traditions; includes the constructions and controls of female sexuality, its acceptable and censored expressions, its location socio-culturally and even materially

--- Domestic Violence and Abuse: any behaviour the purpose of which is to gain power and control over a spouse, a partner or an intimate family member; any behaviour that scares, intimidates, humiliates, isolates and/or controls another person

--- Identity: the condition of being oneself or itself and not another

Social: a person's sense of who (s)he is depends on the person's social group to which they belong or the expectations and opinions that others have for us

Personal (Self-Discovery): the concept one develops about oneself, that evolves over the course of one's life; finding the purpose in life, revealing the experiences that shaped you and realizing what your beliefs are and living by them

Sexual: based on one's feelings, attractions, and desires

--- **New Woman**: refers to the levels of personal autonomy and self -definition in terms of the role, position and influence of the family towards identity negotiation by contemporary middle class, married, urban Indian women; also, young, single women who have careers or waged employments, and who thus function in both private and public spheres. Caplan (1985) contended that for Indian women, the family alone represented their economic and psychological source of security. The attempt will, therefore, be to explore how contemporary literature portrays changes in this set-up and how aspiring Indian women are performing acts of cultural balancing to defend even greater levels of autono0my, while maintaining (even, in some instances, consolidating) their place within their families; playing out their roles as they work through societal expectations of them there by ensuring small but significant shifts in the way their identities are being seen as more fluid then they had previously been permitted to be.

--- Selfhood: the quality which constitute one's individuality; the state of having an individual identity

--- Subjectivity: how a woman see herself (the "subject") lived and her role in life; takes seriously the experience of her as a human being and an individual; also looks at how a woman see her activities and roles as contributing (or not) to her identity and meaning; and, requires taking seriously "women's consciousness"

III. Review of Literature

Some of the books that have opened up the broad area of body politics and female subjectivity are mentioned below:

Radha Chakravarty's *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity* (2008) attempts an impetus for re-thinking subjectivity as it adopts a boldly unconventional methodology, examining the works of six contemporary writers - Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Buchi Emecheta, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison- as potential ways for testing and expanding feminist theoretical debates about subjectivity and agency.

Ketu H. Katrak's book entitled *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* argues whether it is possible to simultaneously belong to and be exiled from a community? And, in response, she says that it is not only possible, but common, especially for women who have been subjects of colonial empires. The book presents a careful analysis of postcolonial literary texts, and uncovers the ways that the female body becomes a site of both oppression and resistance. Katrak examines writers working in the English language, including Anita Desai from India, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, and Merle Hodge from Trinidad, among others. The writers share colonial histories, a sense of solidarity, and resistance strategies in the on-going struggles of decolonization that centre on the body. As a unique comparative look at women's literary work and its relationship to the body in Third World societies, this text is of deep interest.

Jyoti Prasad Saikia's *Gender Themes and Issues* (2017) delves into the study of gender sociology. The discourse on gender plays a vital role in creating awareness of social discrimination and uprooting social evils that exist in our society. The book includes selected topics related to gender sociology along with their critical theoretical interpretations. As the gender discourse is capable of including under its ambit the physiological, psychological, social and cultural difference between men and women, the book is helpful in providing new insights into the differences and inequalities that exist between them. It also includes the burning issues of today such as domestic violence against women, spousal violence, marital rape, female foeticide, all of which is particularly helpful in understanding the primary texts chosen for study.

The well-known pamphlet by Kamla Bhasin entitled *What is Patriarchy*? (1993) looks at patriarchy as a concept that explains women's subordination as well as the areas in which it manifests itself. It highlights specific forms of violence such as rape, female foeticide, witch-hunting, sati, dowry, wife- beating, etc. which keep women bound to home, economically and socially exploited. The work brings to light the fact that women also support the role of men in order to retain privilege. Theories that deny the universality of female subordination and an exploration of the origin of patriarchy are also dealt with. It focuses on Socialist feminists who consider the struggle between women and men as changing historically with changes in the modes of production. The pamphlet concludes by stating that since the last three decades, women and their organizations are challenging patriarchy in a well- thought out, organized and co-ordinated manner.

The collection of essays entitled *Women's Writing* (2014), edited by Jasbir Jain, brings together papers related to the history and development of feminist thought, interpretations and responses to individual texts and shows how, together, they explore the "text"- the individual literary text, the socio-cultural text and the framed narrative – as well as the "context" of the socio-cultural situations, the historical phases and the dimensions of protest. The essays mark the shifts in women's writing at different stages of recognition and awareness and go beyond by establishing connections and interconnections thereby indicating new directions of explorations.

The essay "Gender Practices" in *Gender* (2002) by V. Geetha throws light on the fact that the norms of control lie at the core of the practices of gender. These norms are held in place by social and economic structures which determine a person's access to resources, culture and power. It points out that men and women live out these norms, in the context of these structures, sometimes against their grain; and, at other times, within the terms of their logic, but always performing roles and identities, fulfilling functions and expectations. The essay also discusses the schooling of the body in terms of appearance, experience and discipline. In short, it highlights that gender is not merely a methodological category but a way of signifying relationships of power.

Veena Das' article entitled "Violence, Gender and Subjectivity" in *Annual Review Anthropology* (2008) examines the interlocking of violence, gender, and subjectivity within the overarching framework of the sexualization of the social contract. It analyses the threat of sexual violence on the subjectivity of women who constantly have to consider such factors as reputation and safety in determining how life is to be lived. Das considers the ordinary everyday acts of caring in which women engage for providing healing to help deal with the trauma.

Anitha J. Mattham's article entitled "Projection of New Woman in Meena Kandasamy's Poems" in *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* (vol.1, issue 2, June 15, 2017) talks about how Kandasamy has touched upon many disputable issues such as untouchability, casteism, disrespect of woman and apostasy that women face in society. It throws light on Kandasamy's feminist concern in her poems so as to enable women - especially the marginalized Dalit - to be aware of their pathetic condition, especially in relation to the effects of patriarchal ascendance and the women's social conditioning.

Manjit Kaur's article entitled "Breaking the Stereotype: Women in Indian Fiction in English" in *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (vol.19, issue 6, ver. VII, June 2014, 49-52.) studies the selective fictional works of some Indian writers in English, viz. R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal, with the purpose to map the gradual erosion of the stereotypes built around women characters in the literary scene and in keeping with the growing awareness of the issues concerning women and their cause. It goes back to tracing the seeds of feminist ideology even in those writers

who marked the scene of Indian writing in its very initial stages, beginning with the pre-Independence times and growing into full bloom in the much radical works of the current writers.

Suganya S.'s *Dependency to Independency: A Post-Colonial Study of Women Characters in Anita Nair's Novels* (Dissertation, Bharathiar University, 2014) analyses Nair's novels and her women characters as paving a new way to march towards a better life. The thesis deals with the troubled and tormented lives of the women characters in Nair's novels - namely *The Better Man* and *Ladies Coupe* - and how those women explore their essential independence without losing their self-esteem. Nair's novels *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting*, on the other hand, are seen as tracking the life of revolutionary women who took up a journey towards self- realization by leaving the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. The thesis finally presents the female protagonists of Nair who reach their destination as independent human beings asserting their freedom after a long struggle and protest against a male-dominated world.

IV: Justification and Relevance

The thesis proposes to analyze selected works of three contemporary women writers who thematize the position of woman in society, her social construction, resistance to patriarchal attitudes and, more importantly, her freedom and space. The study will thus be an opportunity to examine how these writers perceive the woman, her body, sexual desires, autonomy or free-will, and the like. It will explore the gaps and lags in the negotiations towards achieving all or any of the above mentioned as well as the parameters for exercising agency among female protagonists living within different class structures and familial bonds, through a re-working of strategies of the self; with an awareness of their rights and difference; by way of tracing the shift in the issue from identity to relationships, from a concern with oppression to being one with the concept of freedom.

V: Objectives

The questions that the present study will thus investigate are: Is the woman doubly bound in the name of 'educated traditionalism'? Is she able to negotiate between her agency and societal norms? How is she shackled in the framework of cultural mores, societal norms and social conventions? How does the patriarchal colonization of women's bodies attempt to subjugate her identity and does she come out of this situation to lead a free life of her own will? Is the woman with economic liberty able to fight stereotyping or does she forsake her desire and ambition? What women want is changing/ shifting from economic rights to social and sexual rights, but is she able to achieve it? In the name of traditions, is her sexuality being controlled? Is the woman able to resist patriarchy and fight gender inequality? Does marital rape take away the soul of marriage? Is marriage nothing but a signing up for a lifetime to be someone else? Why must there be a Draupadi in every single generation? A Sita wronged? A Sita wrecked? And, finally, an Indian male typically and traditionally sees a woman not as a part of the nucleus of a successful relationship, but circulating around it like an electron. Is this attitude towards women changing?

VI: Hypothesis

With the emergence of women writers in Indian writing in English, one can see the birth of new creative form in India which may be termed a kind of literary renaissance. The study, therefore, hypothesizes that though Indian women today have discovered a new individual way of life through education and other modes of empowerment, their physical, emotional, societal, religious and other experiences are varied and cannot be overlooked when examining their subject position and subjectivity in relation to the politics of the body. In testing the hypothesis, the selected writings of Nair, Kundu and Kandasamy will be analyzed for the socio-cultural and psychological insights that their women characters provide in the context of 'being/ becoming' female. The study will include a close reading of the

primary works of the authors and reference to secondary sources for incorporating critical scholarship, from related areas of study, into the thesis.

VII. Research Methodology

The methodology will comprise close reading, interpreting and comparing/ contrasting the primary sources chosen for study. Books on women's/ writing, feminist studies, psychology, sociology, gender studies, LGBTQ, will be made use of in order to establish the social and cultural climate in which the writers write. The findings will be supported with a significant number of theories, essays, articles, dissertations and other critical material on the theme of female subjectivity, caste-based discrimination, boredom in marriage, women's suffering, identity crisis, sexual identity, marital rape, abuse and the broader rubric of body politics. The goal is to focus on research that supports new understanding in the field of Feminist Studies by investigating the present state/position of women in society in relation to her individuality, self-realization and finally self-discovery thereby enabling the emergence of the 'New Woman'.

VIII. Tentative Chapter Plan

Chap. 1 - Introduction: Indian Feminism(s), with special reference to Anita Nair, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu and Meena Kandasamy

The first chapter will focus on the literature produced by contemporary feminist writers who have explored the problems and possibilities of women's experiences. With a brief introduction to the post-Modernist idiom in Indian fiction in English, the focus will shift to Nair, Kundu and Kandasamy's life and works, their writing style and subject matter, especially in relation to the space and scope they provide to their female characters to grow as an individual. Amid the rethinking of women's position and role in society, the term 'New Woman' has gained currency for re-considering gender issues, analyzing female sexuality anew and re-discovering identity. The chapter will close with such a line of thought and which will be taken up in the subsequent chapters in the light of the chosen texts.

Chap. 2 - Body/Identity Politics: Sexuality and the Gender Bender

The second chapter will examine the politics of the female body/identity, i.e. the construction and control of female sexuality; its acceptable and censored expression; and, the resultant identity. The idea will be to interrogate the schooling of the body in terms of appearance, experience and discipline, as a biased practice exercised on women. The emphasis will thus be on how the body is socialized, involving layers and levels of ideological, socio-cultural and psychological influences that impose either the knowledge or the ignorance of female bodies and construct the identity of the woman as a gendered subject or object. A demystification of sexuality, mystified as spirituality and in the vanguard of tradition, will constitute an important element in the study of body/identity politics. The chapter will go on to focus on women's desire, their need for love, respect, acceptance and sexual fulfillment, looking for reasons that alienate a woman from her family or the society. For analyzing the same, the lens of psychology will be applied in order to understand the psyche of the characters; their thoughts and behaviour. The attempt will be to trace the journey of women to achieve wholeness despite obdurate patriarchy and age-old social prejudice. The chapter will also dwell on lesbian relationships and cyber sex as a means of not only physical but also emotional and psychological gratification, together with a breaking-out of alienation, for women.

Chap. 3 - Of Single and Married Life: De-coding Relationships

The third chapter will examine the institution of marriage as a social contract and contest the idea as one of equal partnership. It will go on to unearth its dark side including violence and abuse, especially the traumatic experience of marital rape. The chapter will also detail the collision of thoughts and attitudes of the wedded couple in the experience of life. In addition, it will explore an array of curiosities with regard to the correlation between financial independence and the choice of staying single as well as the high premium that society places on the idea of marriage.

Chap. 4 - Examining Female Subjectivity: Women as Agents of Change

The fourth chapter proposes to examine female subjectivity and agency. Subjectivity demands the exercise of free will, individual identity and self-

discovery and this is particularly true of the characters portrayed in the selected works wherein the protagonists gradually begin to explore their identity and make efforts towards attaining the subject position guided wholly by themselves and not by others. This position is attained not by rebelling but gently making space for themselves in the family and in society.

Chap. 5 – Conclusion: The Final Appraisal

The fifth and last chapter will finally compare and contrast the three authors with respect to their treatment of the subject matter and their views on 'becoming' a woman, by tracing the journey of their protagonists from non identity to an identity/ from 'being' an object to acquiring the subject position / from wielding no power to an empowered status. Of central concern will be the summing up of the discourse on female subjectivity and women's selfhood vis-à-vis cultural traditions and hegemonic patriarchal structures. The chapter will thus be a wrap on how women today understand the self through the experience of/as the body.

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